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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- Not Even Wrong: Gorman on Google

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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

Not Even Wrong: Gorman on Google

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, 1664 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273; Fax: 775-784-1328) <rickand@unr.edu>

The physicist **Wolfgang Pauli** once famously dismissed a research paper as “not even wrong,” meaning that its content was not significant enough to dispute, or perhaps that its author had defined his target so poorly that to dispute it was impossible or not worth the effort. The phrase “not even wrong” kept ringing in my head as I read an opinion column written for the *Los Angeles Times* by ALA president-elect **Michael Gorman**. In this piece, **Dr. Gorman** takes considerable issue with **Google’s** nascent program of book digitization, one which the company is undertaking in cooperation with several large research libraries and which will make millions of scholarly books available online to the general public at no charge.

It is difficult to imagine the **ALA** — an organization that seeks to “ensure access to information for all” — registering public disapproval of a project that will make the content of millions of books accessible to anyone with Internet access. Making these books fully searchable and offering significant portions of them for free online viewing will result in a significant increase in the amount of scholarly information available to those not privileged with access to research libraries. **Google’s** project seems like one that an organization like the **ALA** would embrace. **Dr. Gorman** himself seems to have found it hard to object. While he felt that objection was necessary, he seemed to have trouble coming up with legitimate criticisms. Instead, he offers the following arguments — some of which are simply wrong, and others of which are not even well-defined or relevant enough to be wrong:

“Information isn’t knowledge.” (No, but information is the tool we use to transmit knowledge. If we want to increase the amount of knowledge in the world, we’re going to have to start by getting more and better information to more people.)

“The books in great libraries are much more than the sum of their parts.” (Well,

yes, and so are the books in not-so-great libraries. But the relevant question is this: given the choice between access to a book’s component parts and no access to the book at all, isn’t the former preferable to the latter?)

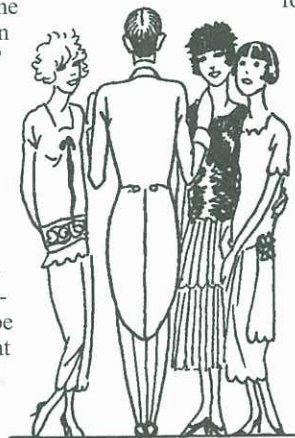
“Not many would choose to stare at a screen long enough to [read a book online].” (Isn’t having online access to the book better than having no access at all? Wouldn’t we librarians rather see more books made available to more people even if they are in a format that isn’t optimal for long-term reading?)

“Books in great libraries are designed to be read sequentially and cumulatively.” (Actually, most are designed to be read individually, and a great many books — collections, anthologies, etc. — are specifically designed to be read piecemeal.)

“The nub of the matter lies in the distinction between information and recorded knowledge.” (The “nub of the matter” lies in the difference between imperfect access and no access at all. The **Google** project would give imperfect access to many people for whom traditional libraries have offered no access at all.)

“(Google’s digitization project is a) solution in search of a problem.” (I would submit that **Google’s** digitization project is a solution to one of the central problems that the **ALA** identifies in its own mission statements: namely, that most people don’t have easy, affordable access to a rich collection of high-quality books.)

Libraries exist to solve a basic problem:



there’s more information out there than any individual can afford to buy and house. The perfect solution would be for everyone to have access to all information, and for it all to be organized in a way that permits quick, easy access to whatever particular chunk of information (be it an article, a birthdate, a journal issue or a book) one needs at a given moment. Unfortunately, that perfect solution isn’t yet possible. In the spirit of compromise, communities have traditionally gotten together to buy, organize, and house copies of many books and magazines so that their patrons can take turns reading them. It’s been a pretty good model, and it has made lots of information available to people who otherwise would have had no access at all. Granted, the arrangement was kind of clumsy and inconvenient — not everyone had access to a library, and no library had everything you might want, and even if you could get to a library that had

what you wanted, you couldn’t be sure it would be available when you got there — but as a compromise it worked pretty well.

The problem is that many of us have fallen in love with the compromise model itself and allowed our world view to calcify around it. Now that a better model is emerging — a model that makes much more information available to many more people much more conveniently (and at much less cost) — we’re responding by pointing out how the model falls short of perfection. When others point out how much better it is than the current arrangement, we respond with resonant but empty slogans or, in some cases, snide dismissiveness.

For those who subscribe to this line of thinking, it appears that access to information is not

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thing that will satisfy your needs now, but also accommodate future projects. On the other hand, another important factor to consider is the portability of the images and the data within the database. If for some reason you don’t like your first choice and you want to move the content to another database platform, there should be some way to export the images and the metadata, possibly as XML data.

For further information and resources on image databases, the Websites below offer links to additional resources.

Image and Multimedia Database Resources — <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Imaging/Databases/>

Imagelib and the Clearinghouse of Image Databases — <http://elearn.arizona.edu/imagelib/>

Author’s Note: The list of products, databases, and services mentioned above is by no means comprehensive. It is merely a small

representative sample of the kinds of services you can expect to find if you undertake such a project yourself. (So, please don’t email me if I left you off of the list.)

*Many thanks to **Katina** for giving me the opportunity to write this column and contribute to **ATG** on a regular basis. Also, special thanks to **Cort Haldaman**, Academic Specialist in **Furman’s** Computing and Information Services department, and **Scott Salzman**, the Systems Librarian for the **Furman University Libraries**, for their feedback and assistance.* 🐘

Back Talk — June 1, 2010

Southern California State University

Post Google Super Print and Post Tsunami



Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

Eleanor Wireman sat thinking about what she was going to say to the new president of the **Southern California State University**. Sixty days previous, at about this same time of the day, she had been lost in abstract thought looking, but not really seeing the ocean view, from her office on the third floor atop the main library when a huge wave came up the beach-head pushing cars, trees, and people in front of it into the parking lot adjacent to the library. She had been preparing to join her staff for a semester break BBQ out on the lawn of the library. The lawn and many of the staff were washed back out to sea. As the wave withdrew, she had the feeling that she was back at the **University of Los Vegas** as the ocean view was transformed into a desert like landscape devoid of vegetation for as far as she could see. Then the succeeding two waves returned with even more power and pushed the debris that had been in the library parking lot further into the campus and wiped out nearly all of the library's collections, including the new robotic automated storage and retrieval collection that had been strategically placed below the grass and flowers of the main quadrangle of the university. At the same time the first wave hit, the library's staff had begun enjoying the BBQ. One day she was the director of a library of 4.1 million books and journals plus access to more than

25,000 e-journals and databases with a wonderful caring and creative staff, the next day her staff and the visible portion of her kingdom was gone.

During the first month after the disaster, the focus was on mourning the loss of staff and students. Soon thereafter, however, it seemed that the university's teaching program recovered fairly quickly. Classrooms sprang up in tents, churches, and idle rooms all over their part of the city. The science faculty who had always wanted to spend all of their funds on electronic serials got their wish since there was no place to put the books if bought. The humanities and social scientists were given one year library cards for neighboring institutions. Eleanor realized that some of them were a bit too happy with being forced to go to **UCLA** for the books they needed, and of course there was **Google Super Print**.

While in the beginning **Google Super Print** had been ridiculed by California's librarians using the same arguments they had applied to **Google** overall: You get too many hits, the collection wasn't built by experts with **SCSU's** students and faculty in mind, it contained a lot of trash, etc. Yet by the time that the tsunami hit, it was clear that books more than 10 years old were no longer being checked out anyway. **Google Super Print** was just too easy to use and

57 million titles were too many to ignore.

Three weeks ago the vice president to whom **Eleanor** reported came over to see her in her temporary office in the big tent where reserve readings and scores of computer terminals could be found. He said that the President had asked that she pull together some ideas for a new library. However, he suggested that since the tsunami had wiped out the entire library program and with the advent of **Google Super Print**, they had the opportunity to rethink what the future should be like: What services would need to be offered in the future? What materials would be purchased given so much is free? Did the materials purchased really need to be catalogued as in the past? What kind of library buildings and furnishing would be needed since most of what might be read was freely available? What kinds of technical infrastructure? What kinds of staff would be needed and how should they be organized — again would the library need the same sized staff given what **Google** was doing? Which of the many cooperative programs **SCSU** participated in should they continue to support — would programs like resource sharing continue? Most importantly, what kinds of budgetary support would she need to accomplish what she felt needed to be done?

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what matters. What matters is that access be provided in a way that is most comfortable for librarians — and if the price of maintaining the library's traditional position is keeping information away from the people, so be it. These folks portray themselves as noble defenders of the book, but what they really sound like are opponents of change.

If **Dr. Gorman** were an obscure young scientist adding one more paper to a crowded field of scientific writing, it probably wouldn't be worth the effort to respond. However, as president-elect of the **American Library Association**, **Dr. Gorman** is set to become the official mouthpiece of our entire profession. If the **ALA's** members really believe in their organization's stated principles, then it's imperative that they raise their voices in dissent from the views expressed by their president-elect. 